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YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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AUGUST 1957



High Sierra Meadow

—C. A. Harwell



Forest Trail
—Ander

Yosemite Nature Notes

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IDYL OF A SUMMER DAY IN THE YOSEMITE SIERRA

By George E. Heinsohn, Museum Assistant

"The places that we have known along now only to the little world of space on which we map them for our own convenience. None of them was ever more than a thin ice held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life at that time; remembrance of a particular form is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years." Thus pictured by Marcel Proust in the closing lines of *Swann's Way* is the dynamic state of ourselves and our universe. Impressions, fleeting glimpses of a pleasurable day spent wandering over a Sierran trail, is what I am about to attempt to incompletely recapture.

One cool, clear Sunday morning in August, a friend and I started out on the Harden Lake Trail from a campground two miles beyond White Wolf for Smith Meadow and Peak. Arriving at Harden Lake in the cool of the morning we found a paradise for birds. Here along the lake shore could be seen the yellow throats of Calaveras warblers flitting among the trees, a creeper wandering up the trunk of a lodgepole pine picking insects out of the bark, flycatchers darting out of the trees making intricate maneuvers through the air in their efforts to catch flying

insects, blackbirds feeding along the marshy lake shore, a white-headed woodpecker busily at work on a lodgepole pine; and swallows flying in the sunlight over the surface of the lake giving chase to insects. Out in the lake trout would occasionally flip in the water, while on the opposite shore a fisherman was at work trying his luck. On the ground numerous chipmunks and golden mantled ground squirrels were busily gathering seeds and oats spilled in the corral area used earlier in the summer, and stuffing their cheek pouches until they looked as though they had a bad case of mumps. Instead of the almost absolute silence which one occasionally finds in the deep forests or at high altitudes, there was a steady background hum of bees and flies above which could be heard the other noises of the forest, the nervous twitter of a chipmunk, the rapping of a woodpecker's hard bill on a tree, the song of a bird, or the splash of a fish. This overlying hum could be heard in all the meadows we visited that day where bees, flies, bumble bees, and other insects work in mutual relation with the flowers that they pollinate. This humming, which so typifies a lazy summer's day, in reality is a sounding board



Forest near Aspen Valley.

—Ander

of the great activity of mother nature and represents the dynamic state of the energy involved and utilized in the life processes.

From Harden Lake the trail climbs a little through stately red fir forests to the rim of the yawning Tuolumne River canyon. The trail follows along the rim of the canyon from which occasional magnificent vistas can be had of the north rim as seen between the boughs of the conifers on our side. Here and there are some gently sloping, somewhat dry grassy areas containing a few aspens.

Around the middle of the morning we arrived at a lush green meadow surrounded by red fir. In a few places along the margin were aspen with their leaves trembling in the breeze. The meadow was carpeted by delicate, white Queen Anne's lace. As we stepped out into the meadow to admire the beautiful

flowers and greenery we heard crashing in the timber on the opposite side. A small rather than a bear and her two cubs emerged from the forest, the cubs darting back and forth in front of their mother as two children are wont to do when on a stroll. The mother was solemnly going about her business, lumbering slowly along, turning over rocks and logs along the meadow's edge searching for food. The two cubs would dart way out in front, quickly climb a tree and then seeing the mother was not coming along fast enough would lose courage and run back to her before scampering off again for a repeat performance. We watched this seriousness of the mother and frolicking of the youngsters going on hand in hand quite sometime until all three concluded the performance by climbing a large lodgepole pine.

From this larger meadow we began to drop down toward Cottonwood Creek and Smith Meadow. The dust of the trail gently rose up in thin clouds as we hiked and it tickled and dried our nostrils. The trail passed through some small verdant, grassy meadows with their scattered aspens, huge Jeffrey and sugar pines on the south facing slopes. The Jeffrey pines emanated a delicious odor sometimes like apples, sometimes like lemon, and sometimes like pineapple but mostly undecipherable. The red fir had given way to white fir as we moved lower towards Smith Meadow. Here and there was an occasional incense-cedar with its rich and, deeply fluted bark.

Smith Meadow is a large open grassy meadow not unlike Crane Flat. Still standing is a relic of a different era in the park's history. For

at one time during the 1880's this lush meadow played host to a sheep rancher, Cyril Smith, and his hosts of wool bearing locusts. Here still standing is a beautiful old log cabin, built by him in 1885. True the entire cabin is no longer present. Depredations of climate, fungus, insects, and man have done their respective parts for only the walls remain. The cabin was built of square, hand hewn logs, and the corners were fastened with wooden dowels driven at angles into adjacent logs. The dry masonry chimney had collapsed, but the hearth stones were still in place. The door, one of the most beautiful of the Yosemite pioneer cabins was gone, but the hand carved wooden hinges remain. Growing out of the rotted floor and fallen in roofing shakes was a lush growth of meadow grass and flowers. Near the

The cubs played like children.

—Anderson



cabin I found remnants of an even longer bygone era. Part of a transportable, globose stone mortar caught my eye. Upon scraping away the pine needles on the large flat rock on which the artifact lay, I discovered two mortar holes indicating how use had been made of this meadow and forest land by Indians in earlier years. Now, except for short periods when the meadow is headquarters for a blister rust or trail crew, it is left to the denizens of the wild. We walked out into the field of white yarrow gently undulating in the warm noon breeze. The upper dry reaches of the meadow were solid white in yarrow, among which were Yosemite asters. In the lower damper reaches of the meadow was an abundance of Queen Anne's lace. Numerous grasshoppers arose from under our feet as we made our way

over to the small grass filled headwaters of Cottonwood Creek.

From Smith Meadow it is a mile and a half up a dusty trail to the top of Smith Peak through pine forests and aspen bordered meadows. From the rock promontory of the peak we had an unobstructed vista in all directions. To the south lay the gently rolling, forested west slope of the Sierra; to the west these forested slopes gradually dropped off into the white haze of the San Joaquin Valley with a few barren scars, probably the result of fire and lumbering activity. To the north the almost barren granite ridges and slopes are cut by rugged canyons; to the east lay the deep glacial gash of the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne above which on the horizon stood Mount Conness and the adjacent Sierran crest; and thirty

Looking down into the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne.

—Anders





Many small meadows were crossed.

—Anderson

five hundred feet, directly below us, in the deep Tuolumne Canyon lay the blue waters of Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, now entombing the Yosemite of the Tuolumne. Twice, while eating lunch at this awe inspiring spot, a white throated swift with narrow swept back wings came hurtling out of the sky with a swish over our heads.

From Smith Peak we headed directly down a chapparal covered slope across country towards the Garden Lake Trail instead of circling back by way of Smith Meadow. As we waded through and on top of the manzanita, buck thorn, and choke cherry we flushed a grouse from practically right under our noses, which with heavily flapping wings made its escape down the slope. Back in the forest the going was easy to the trail. Here and there were signs of the Sierra chickadee as witnessed by the carefully gnawed pine cones we found.

On our return trip we explored a little more fully a couple of the meadows passed in the morning, partly to admire their luxuriance and partially in order to find water to wet our dry throats. In one small meadow, lining a dry water course, was a jungle of bracken fern growing amidst fallen logs and aspen trees. At the lower end of what we now called Bear Cub Meadow we located a small spring, one of the sources of Cottonwood Creek, coming out of the saturated ground. Here we rested for a short while in the midst of the luxuriant six foot grass. In crossing this meadow we stirred up swarms of grasshoppers which pattered like rain drops on the dry, yellow and gold colored leaves and fronds of corn lillies, some of it tattered and torn by earlier summer storms and others with only the delicate ribs of the leaves remaining, eaten out into delicate lace and gossamer by insects. In a

shallow pond could be seen water boatmen and water striders, delicate little aquatic insects, dappling the rich brown muddy bottom and the surface with ever changing patterns. With great reluctance we left this meadow with its buzzing activity in the lengthening shadows of late afternoon.

At Harden Lake all was quiet save for the hum of insects, the surrounding trees reflected in the quiet waters. The birds were no longer pres-

ent. However, the chipmunks and ground squirrels were still scurrying around stuffing their cheek pouches, and the lone fisherman was still casting his line into the lake which was now being occasionally rippled by a fish rising for an insect in the quiet early evening.

As we neared the end of the trail the shouts of children playing in the campground broke the forest's stillness heralding our return to civilization.



INDIAN TREASURE CACHE

By Carl Sharsmith, Ranger-Naturalist

In August 1956 a rare discovery of an Indian cache was made by Mr. Jack Paxton of Fresno, California. This site was situated in Tuolumne Meadows on the lower slopes of a dome at the head of a deep crack. Here Mr. Paxton saw projecting above the surface of the sod fragments of obsidian. Curious to know what they were or what they might be, he began to dig them out and uncovered a large blade of obsidian. Excited with his find he removed a few more pieces and then realizing the importance of his discovery, reported his find to me. We went back to the spot and examined the material that had been removed. Some photographs were taken of the site and Mr. Paxton was warmly thanked for his cooperation. Mr. Paxton was presented a certificate by Superintendent John Preston.

The find was then reported to Mr. Douglass Hubbard, Park Naturalist of Yosemite National Park. He, in turn,

wrote immediately to the Regional Office of the National Park Service in San Francisco, asking if the services of an archeologist might be made available. Of course, it is well known that unauthorized excavation of Indian sites or other antiquities is prohibited by the Act for the Preservation of American Antiquities of 1906, under which no archaeological remains are to be disturbed, excavated, without express permission. Those artifacts are then to be deposited in a public museum for public use.

The Regional Office staff members, in turn, contacted the Archaeological Survey of the University of California, and a few days later Mr. James A. Bennyhoff, Archaeologist of the Department of Anthropology of the University of California at Berkeley, came to Tuolumne Meadows and went with the author to the cache. He proceeded to excavate the test site very carefully. We found



Tuolumne Meadows from Lembert Dome.

—Anderson

at in addition to a large quantity of rather large obsidian chips, there were about 13 blades. These blades, some of which were broken, are of lance shape, sharp on all sides, and from about 4 to 6 inches in length. They represent the largest cache of this sort which has been found in Yosemite National Park. In conversation with Mr. Bennyhoff, he ventured the opinion that the blades and the chips were a cache made by a former Indian owner and were placed there and perhaps forgotten. He suggested also that since some of the blades were broken, and they scarcely could have become broken by themselves protected as they were under the rock, that possibly they may have been purposely broken. As one knows, certain Indians — an example being the Navajos and the Hopis — often break an object to let the spirit out, as it were. The object then is dead. But he also added quickly that we know so little about the habits and customs of the Indians that formerly roamed this region that this would be only a guess.

In making his careful excavation, Mr. Bennyhoff hoped to find some projectile points. By this name we cover all sorts of points that might be used for arrowheads or spearheads — that some indication of the date of the cache might be discovered inasmuch as these blades have no time value. Actually these blades, it must be understood, were made for skinning and scraping, and they were used for a long time. Now, at the base of this dome where the cache was found there are large numbers of obsidian chips and these are always an indication of an Indian site. The dome slopes gradually towards the east and buries itself under the meadow, and it is on the fringe of this dome where the chips were found.

It was our opinion that a test pit dug somewhere in a promising site might reveal something of value, particularly some projectile points which might give us a clue as to the age of use of this particular area.

It was interesting to watch Mr. Bennyhoff's technique in making the test pit, just as it was to see the care



The blades were found in a crack on this dome.

—Hood

he gave his excavation for the blades. I have always suspected that archaeologists have X-ray eyes and I watched carefully to see how the scientist would go about choosing his particular place to make a test pit. In one locality were scattered bits of charcoal. An old log which had almost wholly disintegrated lay pointing upward from the dome toward the east. It seemed to me at the time that it might be just the place where Indians might have sat and proceeded to chip their blades and other tools. This came to mind as we marked out on the surface an area about 5 feet square, then went to work with a shovel. I stood by with a sifter as Mr. Bennyhoff removed the first 6-inch layer, bit by bit. As he passed the shovel load to me I sifted it carefully. There were times and occasions when he used not the shovel but a small trowel with a

blade about 3 inches long. With his skillful hands it seemed as though various points began to take shape or else it was merely my imagination. But at any rate this process, which was slow, went on and on and on. Finally the first layer was removed and sifted. We, of course, began to find small chips of obsidian and these were carefully placed in a bag indicating the particular layer from which they had been removed. The second 6 inches was then dug and a record made of any materials of Indian manufacture or indication of their presence before placing them in a bag, properly labeled. So gradually the pit was excavated with a shovel, a small archaeologist's trowel, and with a brush. The entire process seemed very tedious, but Mr. Bennyhoff showed no signs of tiring. As a matter of fact, he kept on and on and on; the

Each hour passed with no suggestion of eating and we kept on working.

Finally, toward the end of the day, the pit had reached a depth of about 2 feet and there we had about as complete a profile as we would hope for without going deeper. The upper layers were the dark color, rather unlike those in the deeper portions. This upper layer, which varied in depth from about 10 to 16 inches, was dark and looked to my untrained eye more like just ordinary meadow soil, was called by Mr. Bennyhoff the "midden" layer. The darkening and general appearance to the archaeologist's eye indicated to him, and hence the name, a layer which was darkened by long use at frequent intervals. The incorporation over the course of time of organic materials, waste, refuse, had given this dark color.

Now, as we got deeper and looked at the profile, it was evident that

Mr. Bennyhoff could not complete or even satisfactorily interpret in many places what was before us. For example, below the midden layer which was a rather irregular floor level of disintegrated rock, not continuous from that point downward, was what would seem to have been an enclosed area of soil suggesting a pit, possibly for cooking. Down inside this supposed pit which was about 2½ feet below the surface at its uppermost portion, were large lumps of charcoal. By the time we had reached the 2-foot level we were possibly back in time about 2000 years. Charcoal lasts indefinitely as it is inert chemically. Of course, its age could be determined by means of the carbon 14 analysis method but that is expensive and is only resorted to when something critical is in question. We hadn't, for example, found any sort of a projectile point at this level. We had found only one artifact that was down at a depth of

Dr. Sharsmith and Mr. Paxton near site of the find.

—Hood



3 feet, which was evidently a drill. The only other obsidian pieces were just small chips scattered throughout the profile with the pieces of charcoal. In and among portions of the lower layers of the decomposed rock was a deep red color, having all the earmarks of being or having been calcined — that is, subjected at a former time to intense heat. This profile had not the characteristics either of us had suspected. We had expected that such a short distance from the dome (not more than 100 feet to the east), we would find underneath the midden layer stratified deposits of lake material which would then merge into glacial drift. It is the same rocky bouldery material that coats the hill slopes adjacent to this area. This glacial drift should then have merged into the solid rock of the dome.

We found anything but that. As a matter of fact, we had supposed that we could have struck the solid rock long before that time. The slope of the dome was very gentle and was assumed to be underfoot not very far.

Of course, we could have dug deeper. This profile was very puzzling and it would require a cross-section trench completely toward the dome to reveal more clearly the nature of these deposits, which time did not permit us to do. That will have to remain for the future.

Upon completion of our work, as the sun went down, we carefully filled the pit and removed as much as we could of traces of our activities there. The location was carefully recorded along with all of the other data that we had uncovered through

The crack yielded about 13 blades.

—Hood





Unicorn and Cathedral Peaks look down upon Tuolumne Meadows.

—Russell

our efforts. Mr. Bennyhoff suggested that since only chips and points were found that this area was not a village site. Rather it indicated only a temporary camp for hunters and traders. In order to understand just what was indicated by this cross-section, at least in the one spot excavated by us would, Mr. Bennyhoff said, require the use or the disciplines of an archaeologist, a geologist, and pedology — that is, of soil study.

So we left the site really knowing less than we did before. It is to be

hoped that at some future date further studies of this kind can be made by experts in the field of archaeology. At the present time their work is rather consumed by recent developments of roads in various parts of the State where artifacts are being turned up. They have to go to these sites immediately and make their studies before these sites and their contents are irretrievably lost. In the meantime, such places as these in Yosemite National Park are undisturbed and will have to wait for a future date — or opportunity.

A SHARP-SHINNED PREDATOR

By Homer Crider

The Stellar-jay population at Cascades has been making itself scarce in recent weeks. No doubt the depredations of a sharp-shinned hawk have had something to do with the situation.

One day I sighted a fast flying bird dodging in and out among the trees. It seemed to be hanging around and a week or so later Mrs. Crider investigated a commotion under the shrubbery not far from the house. Before she could analyze the situation a small hawk about the size of a wild pigeon flew up and away from his intended meal. Blue feathers were scattered around and soon the jay came to life and fluttered away, more or less the worse for wear.

On the first day of December I heard a bird squawk. Sounds of distress came intermittently and, looking out the window, I saw a hawk, wings spread out on the pavement of the driveway, holding down a jay and giving intense attention to

the matter of dispatching the victim.

It is logical to assume that the strike was made from a spice bush where the jay had perched about four feet above the ground, whence the victim was borne to the pavement and pinned down before it could offer the slightest resistance. The spread pinions and crouch of the predator prevented the jay from raising its wings for even a flutter; and tentative pecks indicated that the hunter meant business. Relative weights were about three to one.

After a few minutes I made a closer approach. The hawk tried to fly and carry his victim, but loosed his hold. Apparently unhurt, the jay first sought the underbrush, then went to the top of a pine and thence far away.

The hawk flew back to a nearby tree, perched and preened his feathers within 20 feet of the writer where he was identified as a sharp-shinned, rather than a Cooper's hawk.

Stellar Jay





Cascades
—Anderson



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Ranger patrol at Rogers Lake.

—Anderson

